

XVIII.—On some Moot Points in Ornithological Nomenclature. By ALFRED NEWTON, M.A., F.R.S., &c.

CRITICISM by competent critics is the last thing of which an author ought to complain; and I am far from objecting to the spirit of the animadversions which Mr. Selater and Mr. Seebohm, in 'The Ibis' for the present month, have made on certain birds' names used by me in the revised edition of Yarrell's 'British Birds.' Indeed I have to thank both those gentlemen for the friendly, not to say flattering, terms in which they are pleased to speak of my labours. It becomes me, however, to attempt to prove that I have not gone so far astray as they would lead their readers to suppose; and this, I trust, I may succeed in doing to the satisfaction of impartial judges.

Mr. Selater begins his remarks ('Ibis,' 1879, p. 346) by regretting that I have not explained my reasons for adopting certain names in place of those usually current. To this my reply is, that, where space allowed me, I have done so, but that, in general, the amount of more important matter which I have had to insert has utterly precluded me from entering at any length on a subject like nomenclature, which interests but few persons—those few being experts, who commonly prefer investigating the subject for themselves.

My friend next touches the question of the type of the genus *Strix*. But here he has nothing new to offer, and contents himself with the opinions that had before been expressed thereon by Mr. Salvin and Mr. Sharpe. Of those opinions I need not say more now; for some years since I treated them in considerable detail ('Ibis,' 1876, pp. 94–105). To the remarks I then made Mr. Selater does not refer. If he has forgotten them I freely forgive him the omission; if he has not forgotten them, I well understand that it may be easier to avoid than to answer the arguments therein adduced\*.

We then come to the specific name of the Short-eared Owl, for which I have used that published by Pallas in 1771†.

\* For those who may not have the third series of 'The Ibis' at hand, it may be convenient to state here that the two principal positions I maintained were:—

"(1) That the type, according to the modern notion, of the Linnæan genus *Strix*, is clearly and indisputably *S. stridula*.

"(2) That in subdividing a genus Brisson's right to affix its original name to the portion of it he chose is not affected by his exceptional position as regards specific names, and that the type of his restricted genus *Strix* is also *S. stridula*."

† Mr. Selater says that herein "other authors have blindly followed" me. Who they may be I do not stop to inquire; but surely it is an assumption to infer that their eyes and opportunities of using them are not so good as his own.

Mr. Sclater expressly guards himself against affirming that the "*Stryx accipitrina*" of Pallas was *not* a Short-eared Owl; but he notices that its head is described as "*inauratum*," and that "no dimensions whatever are given." The latter statement "is not quite correct;" for Pallas begins his description with the words "*Magnitudo* circiter St. Vlulæ;" and as to the fact of his having overlooked the tufts with which the head of this species is furnished, he is neither the first nor the last ornithologist who has done the like—as witness Buffon (*Hist. nat. Ois. i. p. 372, pl. xxvii.*), and, with regard to the female, our own Bewick. Indeed, as every one must know who has handled fresh examples, its tufts are not generally seen till they are sought. Moreover Mr. Sclater asserts "that it does not appear that the *Stryx accipitrina* was really ever obtained, but only 'observed.'" How then, I would ask, came Pallas to mention such a minute character as that of its *remiges* "*extima sola serrata*," unless he had pretty closely examined a specimen? But really to do away with any reasonable doubt as to what his bird was, we have his contemporary S. G. Gmelin, in 1774, giving (*Reise u. s. w. ii. p. 163, pl. ix.*) an effective and unmistakable figure of the species under that very name, and, speaking of various Owls he had met with at Astrakan, particularizing "*wiederum eine besondere Art, die nach einem Privat-Schreiben des Herren Professors Pallas an mich in dem ersten Theil seiner Reise-Beschreibung unter dem Nahmen Stryx accipitrina beschrieben seyn soll, dass ich von derselben auf der 9ten Platte nur eine deutliche Abbildung mittheile.*" The evidence thus afforded is irresistible, even if Pallas's description of the species, saving the omission of the tufts, were not quite as diagnostic as many descriptions I have elsewhere read of other Owls\*.

The next point on which Mr. Sclater differs from me relates to the generic name of the Tawny Owl; but on this, from what I have above said as to the type of the genus *Stryx*, I need not dwell, and so I pass to the question of the specific name of the Eagle-Owl. The erroneous statement that Thomas Forster "gave no such name" as *Bubo ignavus* to this species, and the ingenious hypothesis of that author's having published it "as a synonym which he did not adopt himself," might have been spared had my critic but looked further into the subject. In the second catalogue, wherein Forster says (p. 40) he has "founded a nomenclature," will be found (p. 46),

\* Mr. Sclater also errs in asserting that Pallas "subsequently always called the Short-eared Owl *Stryx agolius*." In his '*Zoographia*' he includes the species twice—once under the former name, but the second time (i. p. 322) under that of *S. ulula*!

in all the dignity of capitals, "BVBO IGNAVVS," as the author's deliberately adopted name for the Eagle-Owl, which no suggestion of its being in the first case a synonym can explain away! Perhaps Mr. Selater may say that I ought to have added a reference to this fact; but it certainly never entered my head that the omission would mislead so well-read an ornithologist, and, accordingly, I thought it enough solely to quote the first use of the name, as is my custom\*.

Lastly, as regards Mr. Selater, I come to the case of *Athene* versus *Carine*. He rightly assigns the reason why I adopted the latter. *Athene* had a prior use in entomology, and no one can doubt that *Athene* and *Athene* are one and the same word, the difference of the final letter being merely dialectic. Now this is not so with *Pica* and *Picus*, which he cites as a parallel case. Those are perfectly distinct words, to which a perfectly distinct meaning has been attached from the days of Pliny to our own. I am sure Mr. Selater is too good a scholar not to admit this fact on reconsideration; and that he objects to homonyms is evident by his substitution, in this very number of 'The Ibis' (p. 388), of *Calochates* for *Euchates*, because, though more than twenty years ago he conferred the latter on a Tanager, it had, more than twenty years before that, been applied to a Beetle.

The objections raised by Mr. Seebohm refer to another group of birds, the Warblers; and he has my fullest sympathy in his difficult task of trying to define it and of determining the names, generic and specific, which its different members should bear. Had I leisure to do so, there are several points in his article ('Ibis,' 1879, pp. 308-317), of far greater importance than nomenclatural quibbles, on which I would comment; for I confess that in some places I fail to catch his precise meaning; but here I shall limit myself to two, in which he has arrived at results differing from those I have reached.

The first of these concerns the specific name to be applied to the Greater Whitethroat. To the best of my belief, no other writer for the past sixty years and more has questioned the fact, that the bird represented by D'Aubenton (Pl. Enl. 581. fig. 1) was of this species†. Temminck, not once but twice,

\* Mr. Selater thinks that "the excellent name of *Bubo maximus*," bestowed by Fleming in 1828, should be adopted for this species. I have accordingly to remind him that Boie, six years earlier, called it *B. atheniensis* ('Isis,' 1822, p. 549), which looks as if Fleming's "name must therefore be rejected."

† There is an apparent but not real exception in Vieillot; for his *Sylvia fruticeti* is admittedly the Greater Whitethroat in autumnal plumage (cf. Degland, Orn. Eur. i. p. 536).

and that in both editions of his 'Manuel' (1815, pp. 113, 125; 1820, i. pp. 208, 226), spoke most positively on this point. Kuhl, Bonaparte, Gray, Gerbe, and others have cited the figure without hesitation, some of them more than once. Years ago I showed the plate to several of my ornithological friends, who were well acquainted with birds and also with the representations of them by draughtsmen of the period. No one of them but, after due examination, declared himself satisfied that the subject of the figure was a Greater White-throat taken in autumn. Indeed it cannot have been anything else; the rufous vertex, nape, and mantle, the rufous edging of the wing-feathers, coverts as well as quills, the white outer web of the external remiges are characters which admit of no mistake. And yet Mr. Seebohm not only asserts that "it is impossible to accept this figure as a clear definition of a Whitethroat," and "equally impossible to determine what bird stood as model for" it, but he suggests the serious charge that D'Aubenton "'evolved' the figure 'out of the depths of his moral consciousness,' and coloured it to agree with Buffon's description." This accusation seems to me groundless; and, for the credit of ornithology, I wish it were withdrawn. For more than a century D'Aubenton's draughtsman Martinet has enjoyed unblemished fame as a faithful portrayer who, if wanting in the artistic execution we have occasionally seen since, yet had skill to seize and reproduce the most characteristic features of any bird he figured, as he most certainly did those of the Greater Whitethroat in the plate which Mr. Seebohm, without adducing the slightest evidence, accuses him of drawing from imagination.

It remains to be said that the name *Motacilla rufa* bestowed by Boddaert applies solely to the subject of this figure, and not to any *Fauvette* or *Grisette* described by Brisson or Buffon. Mr. Seebohm's argument that Boddaert's name should be rejected on other grounds involves, I think, some confusion of ideas, upon which I need not dwell. Its admission would be incongruous with the rule of priority.

This same confusion of ideas seems to me to underlie some of Mr. Seebohm's remarks on the second point at issue, my having restored its Linnæan name to the Garden-Warbler; for the mistakes of subsequent authors form no valid objection to retaining it in its original sense. The state of the case is this. The *Motacilla salicaria* of the 'Systema Naturæ' rests actually on the bird described by that name in the 'Fauna Succica;' synonyms have nothing to do with it; and here, as elsewhere in like cases, their consideration must be excluded. Turning to the work last mentioned (ed. 1761) we find the

brief diagnosis quite compatible with that of the Garden-Warbler, and the description, which is much fuller than that given in the 'Systema,' incompatible in one character only—"linea albida supra oculos," while in other respects it fits the Garden-Warbler alone of all Swedish birds with which Linnæus was likely to have met. Mr. Seebohm considers that the phrase "superciliis albis" condemns the description; but I assure him he is in error, for *supercilium* does not necessarily mean an eyebrow, or still less a "superciliary stripe;" and the word is doubtless here used for the eyelids, which in the Garden-Warbler are clothed with white feathers. Again, the words "*Pedes fulvi*" form no part of the original description, while his suggestion that Linnæus's bird was an *Acrocephalus* is utterly at variance with the statements "*Rectrices remigibus concolores*," and "*Habitat in sylvis*," as well as with the closing remark of the description, "*Avis valde affinis Sylvie* [*i. e.* the Greater Whitethroat], *modo non sexu tantum distincta*." Nilsson, unquestionably the best authority on the birds of Sweden, has never faltered in deeming the *M. salicaria* to be the Garden-Warbler\*; and I cannot at all agree with my critic that, under all these circumstances, Linnæus "failed to define the species clearly," or that his description of it is invalidated by the single inaccuracy above noticed. As well might we declare that his *Falco haliaetus* is not the Osprey because he said of it, "*Pes sinister semipalmatus*" †!

I have thus tried, as briefly as I could, to answer the objections urged by my good friends, and, I trust, with some success, though I have not the vanity to suppose that I shall affect their opinions, for all must allow that a discussion on nomenclature is generally profitless. I cannot even say that I desire to make converts of them, since the names used by zoologists are almost a matter of indifference to me. I am simply striving to carry

\* Herein Gloger (Handb. p. 243) and, it would seem, Lichtenstein concur.

† I said before that I had no wish to criticise such parts of Mr. Seebohm's paper as do not refer to myself; but I must remark that his comments on the *M. borin* of Boddaert seem to be beside the question. In almost every department of zoology we have long had local names brought into scientific nomenclature, witness *Lemur mongoz*, *Lanius tschagra*, *Cobuber hadje*, *Rana pipa*, and *Salmo hucho*, among a multitude of others. The practice is not graceful; but *Motacilla borin* is hardly worse than any of the above, and quite as good as *Estrellda astrild*, *Hypsipetes ourovang*, or *Penelope marail*, which are in common use. I cannot help thinking that those writers who may hereafter forego the expressions *Sylvia cinerea* and *S. hortensis* will not do so in favour of *S. communis* and *S. simplex*, in spite of my friend's recommendation.

out strictly and honestly, so far as in me lies, the Rules set forth by the British Association, and this without regard to consequences. I only regret that the attempt involves so much toil and waste of time; but I will not prolong these tedious remarks on so trifling a subject; I will only say, I have no wish to be thought an infallible interpreter of those rules, and that I am no believer in nomenclatural finality; for I bear in mind that the truthful lines are here applicable:—

“Critics I saw that others’ names efface,  
And fix their own, with labour, in the place.  
Their own, like others’, soon their place resigned,  
Or disappeared, and left the first behind.”

Magdalene College, Cambridge,  
July 11, 1879.

XIX.—*Description of two new Species of Plectopylis, a Subgenus of the Helicidæ.* By Lieut.-Colonel H. H. GODWIN-AUSTEN, F.Z.S. &c.

AMONG some specimens of *Plectopylis pinacis*, Benson, of large size from Darjiling, given me by Ferd. Stoliczka, are several smaller shells which no doubt are referable to *P. macromphalus*, W. Blf., var. *minor*, alluded to in the ‘Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,’ 1870, p. 18. Mr. Blanford shows that it is quite distinct from *pinacis*, and, perhaps not having mature specimens of this Darjiling shell, considered it the same as the Khasi shell, to which it has a very great resemblance. I have now before me a very large number of this small form, also from Darjiling, given me to look through by Mr. G. Nevill; and on a closer examination the differences are well marked.

In a drawing made under the superintendence of Stoliczka the animal of this small form of *Plectopylis* is represented as of a pink colour.

In form the shell resembles *macromphalus*; but it may be distinguished by possessing a hairy epidermis, which, on microscopical examination, differs from *pinacis* in being laterally barred with brown, whereas *macromphalus*, in a large series, is uniformly coloured—also by the more distinct character of a ridge on the parietal side of the aperture, not present in the Khasi shell at its most advanced stage of growth. In most respects it is really a closer ally of *pinacis* from the same locality.

The second species is also supposed to have come from the same part of the Himalayas.